

# Island is home to close-knit community

## Residents know each other well

By Lisa Sumter

Press-Gazette

WASHINGTON ISLAND — As John Rose brought his wife Gerrie home from a Green Bay hospital, he was concerned they would walk into a messy house.

He needn't have worried.

While the couple was away, someone entered their Washington Island home, not to ransack it, but to clean it and get it ready for the returning couple.

"I wanted to get back to straighten up the house but somebody had already done it," Rose said over a steaming bowl of soup at the Main Stop Cafe. "They polished the floors — I couldn't even find my dirty clothes."

It was lunchtime at the country cafe, a prime gathering place for the "islanders" as they call themselves. Almost everyone

Press-Gazette photos  
by John Roemer

who came into the cafe called out to Rose and asked

about his wife. "How's Gerrie doing?" they all asked.

Residents say this kind of caring is typical on this 20-square-mile island off the point of the Door County Peninsula. Some say it keeps the community of 646 year-round residents here.

It's a great place to live," Angie Goodlet said, her hands wrapped around a warm cup of coffee.

Certainly this is not some mystical nirvana. Wages and job opportunities are limited and the cost of living is high, according to residents. Town officials say Washington Island is grappling with landfill and wastewater treatment problems that may be even more tenuous than those of its mainland counterparts.

"If you're over on the mainland at least you can share some of these expenses with neighboring townships," Town Chairman Arbutus Greenfeldt said.

Established in 1850 as Door County's first town, Washington Island has evolved in the last 140 years from a lumber and fishing town to a summer tourist magnet. Town officials estimate that nearly 400,000 tourists visit the island each year.

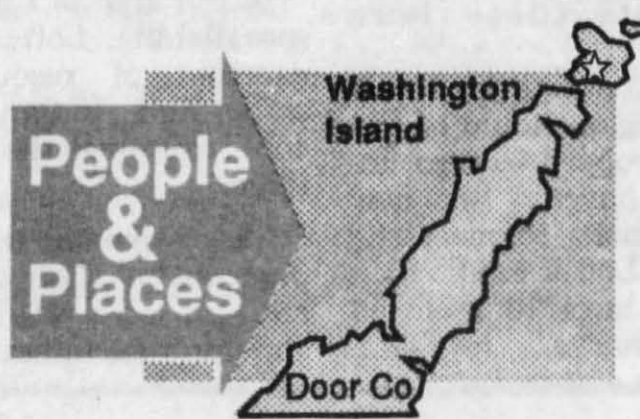
Sylvia Nelson, an island native and schoolteacher here for 50 years, has carefully watched her community change. One of many Icelandic descendants here, she remembers the commercial fishing boon, the rise and fall of dairy and potato farming, the advent of the automobile and the tourism it helped draw.

"Fishing was a very, very great part of our economy," Nelson said. "It not only meant people were on the boats, but they worked in the fish sheds, the women strung nets, there was the transport of



**Syrup boil:** Spring means maple syrup for Washington Island's Scott and Barb Cornell, who watch outside of their home as sap is boiled into maple

syrup over a stove. The Cornells say it takes 50 gallons of sap to make just one gallon of pure maple syrup.



fish ..."

Now only five fishing boats work off the island and tourism is king. Construction is growing, with about 750 summer-only residents joining the island's population. The town has one doctor, one school serving kindergarten through grade 12, a rescue squad and a small airfield.

A recreation center built primarily with funds donated by a part-time resident and a fiber arts school that draws students from across the nation are sources of pride for islanders.

At this time of year though, the island still appears dormant. A chill is in the air and the winding roads, that in a few weeks will buzz with motorists and bicyclists, are empty.

Little traffic is seen in and out of Mann's Store across from the cafe, or at Mann's Mercantile down the road, the island's only grocery and hardware stores.

That doesn't mean, however, that the island is lifeless, its residents say. They see the winter and early spring not as a sentence of unending isolation, but as a break from the summer mania that allows them to spend time together.

Bowling, cross country skiing, snowmobiling and the painstaking process of making maple syrup are popular.

During the winter, ferry trips are limited to one per day. That increases as tourist season approaches.

"I don't find it confining," Jean Bjarnarson said on a trip back from Sturgeon Bay. "Actually, the islanders have more time and are more social in winter."

Residents point to the great number of multi-generation families on the island and the return of those natives who leave as evidence of the quality of life there.

Bjarnarson and Goodlet both left Washington Island with their families, but eventually returned.

Goodlet offered a simple explanation: "This is home."

■ **Next week:** Whitelaw in Manitowoc County

## The Washington Island file

☐ **Population:** 646 year-round residents; 1,400 during the summer.

☐ **Local tradition:** Visitors to Washington Island are offered the opportunity to become official islanders. At a place called Bitter's Pub, anyone who drinks a shot of bitters receives a card proclaiming his accomplishment and declaring him an honorary "islander."

☐ **Tourist talk:** Anyone who deals with tourists on the island will undoubtedly be asked scores of questions by the visitors. Some of the more unusual inquiries:

Do you have electricity here?

Are there telephones on the island?

Do you take American money?





**Fill 'er up:** Jack Cornell, owner of Jack's Service Station, fills the gas tank on a truck at his station.



**Island history:** Sylvia and Spencer Nelson discuss the history of Washington Island in the living

room of their home near Jackson Harbor. They both are natives of the island.



**Coffee klatch:** Angie Goodlet talks about life on Washington Island at the Main Stop Cafe.